

WAY THE RING WENT ROUND

A California Girl Who Couldn't Differentiate Between Cowardice and Expediency

By WILLARD FRENCH

THE "Limited Express" twisted itself like a serpent in the wilderness through the great sand-hole of scintillating, red-brown, blistering and quivering mirages by day and shimmering, shadowy mysteries at night; and so up into the orange-groves of the Pacific Coast.

The sun had set on ahead for the last time; and the passengers in the rear car had disposed themselves for the last restless hours of the journey across the continent. One young fellow with unmistakable markings of a college athlete, was meditatively munching cheese sandwiches and drinking beer—when the front and rear doors opened, with a sharp: "Hands up, all!" from both ends at once.

There were two men, with handkerchiefs over their faces, and revolvers. The porter had not yet collected his tips, so they simply locked him in the buffet and went about profitably. They were experts. Precious little escaped them. The express slowed down at the mountain freight switch. When it dashed on, the men were gone, and another Western incident was history. Even the porter had met with his little loss, for the fellow who ordered the beer and cheese sandwiches had disappeared without paying his check.

Beyond the broad boulevard, engulfed in perennial green, the way into the foot-hills from Los Angeles was decidedly dusty. Dust is the trade-mark of the "Land of Flowers" in the dry season. The horseman took the hill leisurely. The sun was only beginning to draw his pink gauzes about him. He was by no means ready for a plunge-bath in the distant ocean. The rider drew long breaths as his eyes swept the widening horizon, with the peculiar exultation which thrills only one to the manner born, on his return from exile to earth's Eden.

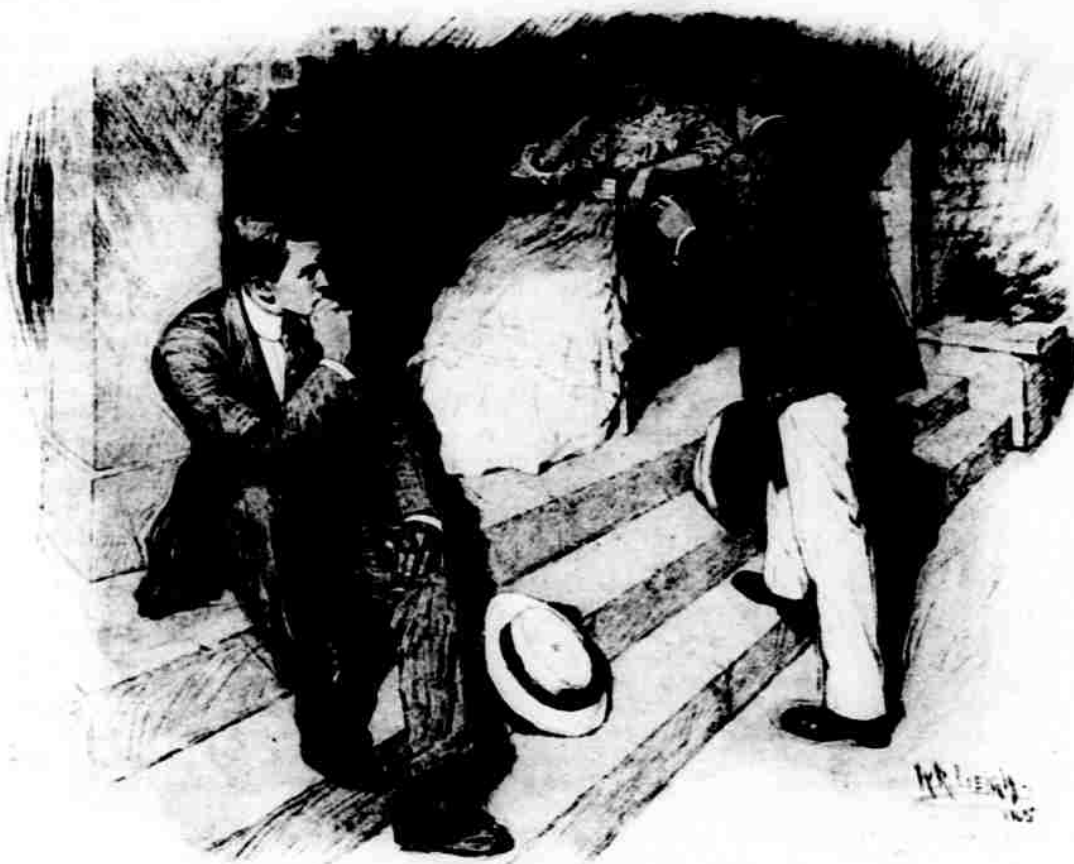
As they skirted the cliff, he looked down into San Gabriel Valley, with its sweetly solemn thought of two centuries ago—the old, gray mission, the silver-plated river and protecting mountains graduating from green to misty blue. With the next turn it was the flower-set city, stretching toward the sea, till there too the view grew indistinct in tinted haze. The sea-breeze was bringing from the ocean the canvas upon which the sun would soon be painting a glorious setting. The next turn was through an arched gate and up a concrete drive, toward an ideal California villa.

In a wicker arm-chair on the inset veranda sat the beauty of the Pacific, composited and vitalized. Nature has a way of bringing the girls of California up to her own standards when she has the opportunity; and California girls used to have the common-sense to leave it to Nature.

When the horse appeared, the girl dropped her book, balanced herself half over the top step and stood waving her handkerchief.

The rider almost dropped his hat in a wild swing, and bungled in dismounting—a frightful *faux pas* for a Californian; but the grand calm had forsaken him. He had been loving that girl for only she knew how long. For years he had been living for the moment which at last had come. His love-talk heretofore elicited only peremptory instructions to wait till his education in the East was completed.

Until he reached the gate, he had thought of it as a foregone conclusion, requiring at most only a touch of commonplace sentiment, by way of ratification. But the girl seemed changed, older, more grown-up. She was infinitely prettier even than he had ever dared think her; and before he was safely on his feet and the horse at the hitching-



The Cigarette Was on Its Way Up to the Waiting Lips

post, he was wishing himself a mile back on the road, where he could think it all out again and brace up.

"I say, Tige, but it's good to get back!" he began, tossing his gloves on the veranda. But the touch of her hand set him trembling, and he turned to the inevitable brush, the brush that, till the pavements stretched into the suburbs, hung at every door-post, high or humble, as much to the incoming as the door-mat. "I suppose you've a scold on ice for me, Tige, for not coming this morning, as I wrote," he added. "And I wish you'd serve it quick, so that we can get down to common-sense."

"We might begin with common-sense at once, by my reminding you that my name is Lilian, or better, Miss Baxter," she said, standing with handkerchief in hand, smiling at the bent, busy figure.

"Glad to hear you haven't changed it," Jack looked over his shoulder. "I had it right, hadn't I, on the letter I sent you a week ago?"

"That was a week ago. By the way you spoke, I thought you might have forgotten."

Jack had resumed the brushing, and said irregularly: "Miss Lilian Baxter has helpful qualities for a benighted postman who goes by idiotic baptismal records; but 'Lily' doesn't fit those cheeks and eyes of yours, or those pretty white grinders. It never did, and it's worse than ever now, with that stunning bang. By Jove, Tige, but it is stunning! When did you think it out?" Jack paused to admire, with the brush in a position suggesting that it was a flag about to be waved. "The only lily you resemble is a tiger-lily, and Tige fits you better than ever. I say, are you opening up this way just because I am late?"

"Indeed I am not, Jack. I knew very well that you would not be here this morning, when I read of the hold-up last evening on the train. It is only an effort to remind you that we are out of baby frocks, and that if Harvard and Boston have failed to imbue you with a sense of propriety, why—"

"Dear me, I learned lots of things at Harvard, Tige, that I've no intention of remembering, and I left there a week ago. But I say, what made you think that I wasn't on the evening train when you read of the hold-up?"

"Because if you'd been there there wouldn't have been any." The girl dropped into the arm-chair again, giving the toe of one slipper a sug-

gestive toss. "Do you suppose I think you would sit dangling your hands in the air, for a stranger to empty your pockets?"

"Why not?"

"Well, silly, because it would be cowardly; and I don't believe that even an Eastern education could make a coward out of you."

"Would it have been cowardly, Tige?" Jack began brushing again, as though he had found some more dust.

"Would it? If that is a proposition from Harvard, Jack, it is one thing you would better have forgotten before the first week was out, especially if you spent that week in coming back to California. Think of a carful of people sitting like this, for two men to help themselves!" Her pretty hands went up, handkerchief and all, and a merry laugh drifted between them.

"I never carry a revolver, Tige. What could I have done? And suppose that a fellow was armed and ready to take chances. Wouldn't it have been rash to set a lot of bullets flying about a crowded car?"

"Maybe, in scholastic sophistry, Jack; but all the same to give up and be pocket-emptied was cowardly; and, being a Californian, I detest cowardice."

"I should think it more a question of expediency than courage," Jack said, reluctantly hanging up the brush. He sat down on the top step, the side away from the arm-chair, and leaned against the post. He could not get his eyes above the vague prophecy of a future crack across the toe of his riding-boot. He was wondering how he came to feel so satisfied with everything, just outside the gate.

"That sounded beautifully Bostonish, Jack," the girl said; "but you're not in Boston now, my boy. And you know very well that if you had been on the train last evening you would never in all the world have—"

"I was there," Jack said, looking into her eyes.

"Jack Wilton! For shame! I don't be—"

"I was there, Tige."

"I don't believe it, Jack."

"You'll have to, Tige, for the fellows got the ring I wrote you about."

"Did you hold up your hands, like this, and let two men—"

"There was only one, near me, Tige. I let him empty my pockets, and among other things take the diamond ring I was bringing to you. And dash it all! I hadn't stopped to have it engraved."

The slipper-toe gave a different toss. "It is quite immaterial," she said. "I've no fancy for lions after they've been turned into lambs in Eastern universities."

"Tige!"

"Well, I might as well say it right out, Jack. There's no use waiting for euphony. I mean it. A pretty protector such a man would make! If I had been with you I suppose you would have delivered me up too, if they chose to take me, all as a matter of expediency."

"What? With all that pretty pink chiffon and those stunning bangs, Tige?"

"Some one is coming up the drive. It is Count Zorotti, a Spanish nobleman. He has taken quite a fancy to us and has been here no end of late. I beg of you to remember that I am Miss Baxter."

Jack remembered, and yet he found time for a certain amused satisfaction over the surprise in the Spaniard's eyes and a quiver of his lips which continually startled his mustache, indicating that the warmth of consideration he was receiving was something new and unexpected. He was not bur-

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